



Baird backs plan to boost salvage logging after fires

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Rekindling debate over logging in fire-scarred forests, U.S. Rep. Brian Baird this week will introduce legislation to speed salvage, replanting and research on national forests ravaged by disturbances such as wind or wildfire.

Baird, a Vancouver Democrat, and U.S. Rep. Greg Walden, a Republican from Hood River, Ore., outlined the legislation during a visit with The Columbia's editorial board earlier this week. They plan to introduce the bill on Thursday.

The bill, known as the Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act, allows federal land managers to act quickly to salvage merchantable timber after a fire, wind storm or other disturbance. The two Northwest congressmen said post-fire salvage operations are often delayed by intensive analysis required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

"By the time you finish it, the wood's worthless," Baird said.

The American Lands Alliance has already launched a national campaign with other environmental groups to defeat the Baird-Walden bill, releasing a report on Tuesday comparing it to the controversial salvage rider of 1994. The rider, which authorized a slew of timber sales while restricting public comment or judicial review, fueled a political backlash by environmental groups.

Baird said he doesn't think that will happen this time, partly because he and Walden intend to ensure that federal agencies do not abuse their discretion to harvest only fire-damaged trees.

"We're going to be right on top of it," he said. "We're going to make sure you do it right."

Although salvage logging has not been a hot issue in Southwest Washington national forests in Baird's 3rd congressional district are not afflicted by the frequent, intense fires more common east of the Cascade Mountains Baird said local sawmills and timber workers stand to benefit from logs salvaged elsewhere across the Pacific Northwest.

"For me, it's a common-sense sort of bill," he said.

The quick decay of dead or dying trees makes it imperative to salvage those logs quickly, said Tom Partin, president of the American Forest Resource Council, a

timber industry group in Portland. Partin said he also is pleased the bill will encourage reforestation to occur quickly after the salvage takes place.

"It's something that's long overdue," he said. "I think they're taking a great step forward with this bill."

Walden noted that 20 billion board feet of timber is laying on the ground in Mississippi and Louisiana in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, 10 times the annual logging rate for the entire national forest system. Similar to wildfires in the Northwest, he said, forest managers will need to act quickly to salvage the logs before their economic value is lost.

"You don't have a year or two years to go in and decide what to do after a fire," Walden said. "We need the tools to be able to move quicker after these events."

Environmentalists acknowledge that decay undermines the economic value of fire-scarred logs, but they say fire-scarred landscapes are the most in need of full analysis before logging takes place.

"It's really hard to do a rush job on salvage logging because it's such a sensitive landscape," said Jasmine Minbashian, communications director for Conservation Northwest in Seattle. "Salvage, in general, is not an area of common ground."

National forest managers already have the ability to devise contingency plans with plenty of opportunity for public involvement in case of a fire or other disturbance, said Susan Jane Brown with the Pacific Environmental Advocacy Center at Lewis and Clark College in Portland. Brown said she's worried that Baird and Walden's bill will sacrifice forest health in the name of expedient logging.

"It's really just bad management, without a lot of opportunity for public comment to change those options before they're implemented," Brown said.

Some environmental groups view Baird's sponsorship as a betrayal.

Representatives of Conservation Northwest pointed out that much has been done lately to bring together rural community members, environmentalists and timber workers to plan mutually agreeable timber sales on the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. The Pinchot Partnership promotes collaboration to manage a 1.37 million-acre forest that covers Baird's congressional district.

"It's troubling that instead of putting out a bill that helps support this kind of collaborative work, Baird is putting out a bill that creates more divisiveness and contention," Minbashian said.

Baird, during his interview with The Columbian's editorial board, said his office has already fielded complaints about the bill over the past few weeks. Calling these complaints a form of "psychic environmentalism," Baird said the groups are pre-opposing a bill they haven't seen.

"The attitude seems to be, 'You shouldn't have anything to do with this,'" he said.

Baird acknowledged he is the only congressional Democrat in the Northwest to support the bill at this point. "Frankly, a lot of them are sitting back and waiting to see how much abuse this guy has to take," Walden said.

The Sierra Club, which campaigned for Baird during his campaign to unseat Republican Rep. Linda Smith, will oppose the bill.

"Am I disappointed that Brian's involved with this particular endeavor? Sure," said Bill Arthur, the Sierra Club's Northwest director in Seattle. "I'm sure we'll be disappointed with some of our friends in the future."

Despite the disagreement over the salvage bill, Arthur said he doesn't expect Baird's sponsorship to undermine general support for Baird in the environmental community.

"This is one of those areas where we disagree," Arthur said.